FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
April 8, 2001, Palm Sunday

A Strange New Power
John M. Buchanan

Christianity is the only world religion that confesses a God who suffers. It is not that popular an idea, even among Christians. We prefer a God who prevents suffering, only that is not the God we have got. What the cross teaches us is that God's power is not the power to force human choices and end human pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up the shattered pieces and make something holy out of them.

Barbara Brown Taylor
God in Pain

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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A STRANGE NEW POWER
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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Luke 19:28-40
Luke 13:31-35

"Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons.' . . . How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings."
Luke 13:32, 34 (NRSV)

Dear God, on this day which celebrates the coming of your Son to Jerusalem, remind us that he comes to our city; remind us that he comes into our lives. Startle us with the immediacy of his presence: give us faith to receive him and courage to live our lives, in our city, as his faithful disciples. Amen.

I do not ordinarily read the *Financial Times,* but I do read what friends send me from a variety of sources and which they think might interest me or at least provide balance to my political views. And so, when a clipping from the March 1 edition of *Financial Times* came across my desk with the headline "Ad agency says brands are the new religion," I sat up and took notice. That, I thought, will preach.

Apparently, Young and Rubicam, one of the world's largest ad agencies, keeps a running table of global marketing and consumer trends and recently announced its conclusion that "belief in consumer brands has replaced religious faith as the thing that gives purpose to people's lives. . . . The brands that are succeeding are those with strong beliefs and original ideas. They are also the ones that have the passion and energy to change the world." And Young and Rubicam isn't the only agency on this track. A popular London design consultancy, Fitch, is also using religious language—and observed that more people flock to Ikea on Sunday mornings in London than go to church and—the real clincher—since 1991, 12,000 people have been married at Walt Disney World, always in the global top ten brand names.

Examples of "uncompromising belief brands," with clear and even inspiring marketing logos or symbols, according to Young and Rubicam, are Calvin Klein, Gatorade, MTV, Nike, Virgin, Sony Play Station, and Yahoo.

And we have a problem: our image. Our most visible, endurable, and descriptive icon is a symbol of humiliation, defeat, shame—a cross, which, no matter how you adorn, burnish, polish, and decorate it, remains what it is: an instrument of crucifixion, a particularly dreadful form of capital punishment, which nobody wants to think about.

We have an image problem, and on no day of the year is it more acute than on this day, Palm Sunday, with its swirling crosscurrents of passion and emotion: Jesus' triumphal entry to a city

that will turn its back on him in five days; the voices of children singing hosannas over a counterpoint of blunt political reality planning to eliminate Jesus; crowds of pilgrims, poor people mostly, waving palm branches as if they were welcoming an actual king; and Roman officials, legionnaires with swords and spears whose job is to keep the peace, whatever it takes.

We have an image problem. And for two thousand years we have been tempted to resolve it by using something better, something more palatable, a more marketable symbol of our faith—an eagle maybe, a fierce bird of prey, or maybe a lion, or a throne, something to inspire and stir the blood. Church growth experts advise their followers not to emphasize the cross—or anything associated with it. On a Sunday morning, people don't want to be reminded of humiliation and suffering and death. So build it like a theater, get the cross out of there, make it user friendly, a band instead of an organ, upholstered seats instead of pews.

Fleming Rutledge, a distinguished Episcopal priest in New York City and a fine preacher, remembers being invited to preach at a fancy Episcopal church in suburban Connecticut on Good Friday. When she was greeted by the rector, he said, "I hope you're not going to say anything about the blood" (*Help My Unbelief,* p. 142).

We have a problem with our central image because we live in a culture that assumes and teaches and celebrates the proposal that the purpose of the human enterprise is to succeed, to grow, to get bigger at whatever it is you are doing, to get all the rewards that are available. It is a powerful and all-pervading motif. We live it so thoroughly, we are not aware of it and are perplexed when it is challenged by someone who suggests that succeeding, growing, acquiring may not be the purpose of human life—may even be a form of badly missing the mark and misplacing our energy and passion, which the Bible calls idolatry.

In her book, *Help My Unbelief,* Rutledge tells about a full-page ad in the *New York Times* for a new book, *How to Get What You Want and Want What You Get,* which promises the "ultimate guide to personal success . . . the way to joy, confidence and contentment in just four easy-to-follow steps," and she asks,

> Do you find that funny? It seems to me anyone who is a Christian would find it preposterous and even hilarious. I guess there are people who really believe that somewhere, somehow, there are four easy steps. . . . There are no easy steps, even to a flat stomach. . . . Compare these four easy steps to the 12 steps of AA . . . which are certainly not easy. (pp. 136-137)

We have an image problem and at no time is it more acute than on Palm Sunday—even the first one. That crowd of pilgrims that welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem by stripping the coats from their backs and laying them in his path, waving palm branches and shouting patriotic slogans, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord," were in for a big disappointment. They actually believed he would seize power, real power, the throne of David, overturn the political status quo, drive the Romans into the sea, and restore Israel to the glory of David's and Solomon's magnificent era. They "began to praise God joyfully," Luke tells us, "for all the deeds of power they had seen." And they were in for a big letdown; they are about to see such a

peculiar demonstration of power that it would disappoint and disillusion and anger and finally enrage them and their "hosannas" will become "crucify him" in five days.

It turned out it wasn't the power they were looking for. They should have known—had they been listening. We should know. He told them and us that this is how it would be, that in this drama is a radical new way of thinking about power, a new definition of success, a new image of the meaning and purpose and glory of human life.

It happened on the way to Jerusalem, after he had decided to leave the relative safety of Galilee and had "set his face" toward the capital, the citadel of the faith and hope and aspirations of his people. Along the way, Pharisees warned him that Herod, the Roman appointed puppet king, was planning to kill him. Jesus said the strangest thing. He called Herod a fox—"Tell that fox for me that I am casting out demons, performing cures. . . ." And then the poignant lament, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem. . . . How often I have desired to gather your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!" A fox and a hen, what an interesting pair of images. I've read that passage all my life and never before noticed—fox and hen: crafty, fierce, predator and vulnerable, weak, maternal love—in the same discourse.

I'm indebted to Barbara Brown Taylor for pointing it out to us. It came into focus for her on a trip to the Holy Land. On a hill outside Jerusalem, there is a small chapel built on the spot where Jesus lamented over Jerusalem. In the wall behind the altar there is a window through which you can see a splendid view of the city. And on the front of the altar, commemorating the very spot, is the image of a rooster, "a bright, fierce-looking bird made out of colored tiles with a flock of little chicks under his wing." "A rooster?" Brown asks, "Jesus didn't say rooster. He said hen."

If you've spent even a few minutes around a barnyard and a chicken house, you know that a rooster, during business hours, is not to be trifled with. He can defend himself. He can attack aggressively with sharp spikes in the back of his feet and with pointed beak. He is fast and agile and for thousands of years, people have trained roosters to fight to the death—for their entertainment. Jesus didn't say rooster. We wish he had. Sometimes I think the whole vast sweep of Christian history is an attempt to pretend he said rooster. He said "hen."

I loved the way Taylor describes it:

> Jesus likened himself to a brooding hen whose chief purpose in life is to protect her young. . . . She doesn't have talons or much of a beak. All she can do is fluff herself up and sit on her chicks. She can also put herself between them and the fox, as ill equipped as she is. At the very least, she can hope that she satisfies his appetite so that he leaves her babies alone. . . . How do you like that image of God? (*Bread of Angels,* p. 125)

"Jesus has disciples. Herod has soldiers. Jesus serves. Herod rules. Jesus prays for his enemies. Herod kills his. In a contest between a fox and a chicken, whom would you bet on?" (p. 124).

It is a hard lesson to learn in the heat of the moment. Who would have bet on the Christians when they huddled in the middle of Circus Maximus with 100,000 screaming citizens of Rome

wanting their martyrdom? Who would have bet on the monks when the Vikings invaded and raped and killed everyone? Who would have bet on a gentle German pastor by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer instead of the regime that called itself "The Thousand Year Reich?"

"How many divisions does the Pope have?" the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin asked when he was advised that his military aspirations were irritating the church. Who would bet on Ghandi and not the British Empire, or Martin Luther King Jr., and not Bull Connor, Orville Faubus, the Alabama National Guard? Who will bet on the Palestinian children and not the soldiers of the fifth largest military force in the world?

You can't kill enough Christians in Rome to overcome the strange power of love. You can't execute enough Christian protestors, you can't jail enough Civil Rights demonstrators, you can't shoot enough Palestinian children and adults to overcome the power of justice—which is what love looks like politically.

The fox and the hen—the strange power of love; and it is the job of Christians to live faithfully in a world that will always bet on the former.

A visit to Rome is an exercise in that strange dynamic. The ancient ruins of imperial Rome were stripped of their marble to build grand churches and monuments to a new empire—a Christian one; the church, which for centuries acted like an empire, was an empire with military might, economic influence, a literal, muscular, powerful reality. And yet, even at its most arrogant and imperial, the church could not rid itself of its most precious, most powerful image. The Basilica of St. Peter is the largest church in the world. It is stunning in size, architectural symmetry, aesthetic beauty. The plaza outside is surrounded by the three-tiered colonnades of Bernini—I think one of the most beautiful, most emotionally satisfying artistic experiences in the world, like two huge arms outstretched to enfold the whole world. It is very impressive. It exudes power.

But more powerful—most powerful—is the image, just inside the massive bronze doors, directly to the right—a sculpture, dwarfed by the massive walls and ceiling and dome; the Pieta, by Michelangelo: a beautiful young woman, cradling in her arms, the lifeless body of her son. We were there two weeks ago, on Sunday morning, for a final visit before our return to Chicago. Outside, the Rome Marathon was happening. A military band was playing Sousa marches at the head of Bernini's colonnade. The square was crowded with tourists. Inside, several masses were happening in various corners of the vast cathedral. Security guards were shooing people here and there; processionals of elaborately vested clergy were moving about. And over in the corner, a crowd of tourists from everywhere in the world, stood silently, looking, pondering, wondering, in front of Michelangelo's masterpiece: the young man who is the focus, the founder, the foundation of all of this—dead, enfolded in his mother's arms.

In a recent series of essays on the meaning of Christ's death, theologian Mark Heim explained the various ways the crucifixion has been explained down through history.

·Jesus died as a substitute victim. We sin—he pays the price. We're guilty—he's innocent—he is punished in our place.

·Jesus becomes poor and humble and forever identified with the poor and oppressed.

·Jesus is God's complete self-giving and self-emptying: God's ultimate identification with us, even in our suffering and our dying.

·Jesus is the demonstration of God's love and the extent to which God will go to show us that love.

The technical name is atonement theories, and I used to think it was important to claim one of them and understand it as the truth. I'm not so sure of that any more. I'm not sure you and I will or can understand love that empties itself, gives life away. But I do know that apart from that love, Christian faith is just another religion. I do know and believe that that love of God, incarnate, that man going humbly to his cross, that man who chooses deliberately not to claim the kind of power and privilege that you and I live for—that man is the truest human being who ever lived and that insofar as you and I live like that, even occasionally, we approach something of the meaning and purpose and glory for which we were created.

I'm not sure we can or ever will understand, but I know I believe that love, which gave life away, is the best thing anyone ever did for me and for you—and that it is our final safety, our security, our salvation, and our freedom.

And so

Here might I stay and sing,
No story so divine;
Never was love, dear King,
Never was grief like thine.
This is my Friend,
in whose sweet
praise I all my days
could gladly spend.

Amen.

Prayers of the People
Dana Ferguson, Associate Pastor for Mission

Let us pray:

We like to think, O God, that if we had been there, we would have treated you with the respect you deserved: that we would have found majesty in lowliness, greatness in meekness, truth in service, and glory in sacrifice; that we would have seen with our eyes, heard with our ears, understood with our hearts, and recognized Jesus of Nazareth as the servant of the Lord and the Christ of God; that instead of crucifixion, there would have been a coronation; and that the triumphal entry would not have been mocked by Good Friday. But we know that the outcome would have been the same. For we, too, are hungry for a hero. We crave some glimpse of greatness. We are starving for the spectacular.

This day reminds us of the worst and the best we can be. One the one hand, we see the selfishness, the fear, the avarice, and the cowardice that made Calvary inevitable. On the other hand, we see the selflessness, the confidence, the grace, and the courage that made Calvary possible. We ask for success, and you teach us acceptance. We ask to be loved, and you ask us to love. We ask for ease, and you challenge us. We ask for a triumphant Messiah, and you come as one obedient unto death.

Walk among us, surprising God of peace. If we remain speechless as Christ passes by, if we stand by the road in timid silence, confront us with the moment of decision, O God. If we are too proud to follow, cast out our vanity and let us become modest disciples. If we are too angry to follow him, dispel our hostility and let us become makers of peace. If we are too hesitant to follow him, exorcise our fear and let us become bearers of courage.

Although the savior may not have appeared as we would have expected, we watch the parade now in awe. In awe of your love and sacrifice for us. In you, O God, we find a cause we can live for, a self we can live with, and a redeemer we can die with. Indeed, we are blessed ones. And so, we would not gather this day, O God, reminded of the messiah who came to serve, without lifting up the needs. We pray for those whose voice is stamped out by the crowd, for those who lack the courage to face the crowd, for those places where there is no reason or room for a parade, for those who stand at the tomb weeping, for those who feel Easter will never come. Be with all of these your children and wrap them in your peace and comfort.

Lead us into the week ahead chastened by the knowledge that we too are capable of the treachery to which even your disciples succumbed; comforted by the assurance that, just as you did not forsake them, you will not forsake us; and strengthened by the certainty that you can change us, as them, from fickle friends into faithful disciples. We ask this and all things in the name of the Jesus Christ, who taught the disciples to pray together, saying, Our Father . . .

Portions of this prayer are borrowed from Litanies and Other Prayers *by Phyllis Cole and Everett Tilson (Abingdon Press).*